
I Heard Bells

**An article from the *Cathedral Times*
by the Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler,
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It happened just as I started to read the gospel on Sunday evening. What a beautiful and serene service that was, conducted Sunday evening in the new St. Mary's Chapel with its windows overlooking the woods! As the sunlight fades away each Sunday, we celebrate our calmest and most informal Eucharist in that place. The music is folksy, and the prayers are usually taken from an Anglican tradition outside the United States. This past Sunday, we were using prayers from the Iona Community, in Scotland.

Just as I started reading the gospel, I heard bells.

They were little bells at first, and then the sound grew larger. After a few seconds, everyone in the chapel knew what it was. It was someone's cell phone. The embarrassed party quickly exited the chapel, turned off the sound and returned to hear the gospel. I smiled and rejoiced.

I rejoiced because I like bells. I do not like interruptions, mind you. But I do like bells. That incident made me remember all the ways that churches once marked their liturgies with bells. At one time, Anglo-Catholic churches would ring bells at certain points of the Mass, in order to remind the faithful of sacred moments. That cell phone bell was simply marking the introduction of a great event: the reading of the Sunday gospel!

I had a strange fantasy. We all know how obtrusive the cell phone ring can be. It always seems to ring in public places at the most inopportune moments. The rings cause both scowls and grins. But what if we could program our cell phones to ring at opportune times? What if we set them to ring at a time meant to wake us up, to tell us that something holy is occurring? What if we programmed our phones to ring right at the moment of the Words of Institution during the Eucharist? (On second thought, do NOT try this!)

Sometimes, our phone calls are, indeed, obtrusive. I did not need that phone call advising me that I could obtain a lower interest rate on my mortgage. I did not need that call complaining about still another error somewhere. (*While the Reverend Bryan Akker was performing a marriage at Christ Family Church in Davenport, Iowa, the groom received a call on his cell phone. Turning away from the congregation, the groom took the call, then reported to those gathered: "You won't believe it, but it was my insurance man. He heard I was getting married and wanted to know if I wanted to upgrade my policy."*-From *The Christian Century*, July 26, 2005, p.7)

But sometimes, those phone calls are our lifelines. They are introductions to conversations which change us. They connect us to family, to friends, to the church, to one another, and even to strangers-if we have the time to pick up the phone.

I do not want cell phones ringing at church, nor do I want them ringing at the symphony or the opera or the play, or in any place where a crowd has gathered to focus on something else. I do not like interruptions. But when a cell phone does ring, when a bell rings, I have an opportunity, in the Spirit, to interpret the ring in another way.

That ring may indicate that something holy is about to happen. At the Cathedral, we ring our great bells, not at certain, pre-determined "clock" times of the day. Rather, we ring them at sacred times, after major services, at funerals, at weddings. We ring them at noon on designated days of prayer. When you hear the Cathedral bells ring, you can know that a holy

event has transpired. When you hear the bells ring, you can offer a prayer that joins with the prayers of the Cathedral.

The next time you hear any bell, even the ringing of a cell phone, even if the call is not for you, you can use that sound to remind you to pray. Somewhere, something holy is transpiring, or at least it could transpire. A word of grace, a word of thanks, a word of blessing, could transpire. Let the bells of this world, even the bells of our contemporary technology, remind us that God is present. Let them continue to call us to holiness, and to the sacredness of the present moment, wherever we are and whatever we are doing.

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